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ABSTRACT

Observation and interviews of the children in two third grade classrooms--one in which children write frequently and learn punctuation skills in context, and one in which children learn punctuation in isolation--suggest that punctuation skills are learned more effectively in context. In interviews the "writers" could explain an average of 8.66 kinds of punctuation, while the nonwriters could explain only 3.85 kinds. The writers liked using punctuation because they saw that it clarified their writing for their classmates, while fewer than 25% of the nonwriters liked punctuation. The writers understood that punctuation affects the pace and inflection of language: 47% of their explanations referred to this, compared to only 9% of the explanations of the nonwriters. While the nonwriters described punctuation by trying to remember rules they have been taught, the writers referred to their writing in defining the use of punctuation. It also has been noted that the writers learned punctuation due to their increased need for it as their writing increased in complexity and that, in contrast to the nonwriters, they absorb information about punctuation from books and from classroom interaction. Their teacher encourages experimentation with punctuation, deferring corrections to final drafts of their papers. (Numerous quotations from first and third grade children's writing and from their conversations about punctuation are included in the paper.) (GT)

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When Children Want to Punctuate:

Basic Skills Belong in Context

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With masking tape, six-year-old Sharon carefully hangs the make-believe menu on the wall. Classmates cluster around, and they peer up at it together. "Wait a minute," Sharon says as she reads, "Baconburger 65." Then she says, "We gotta add a money sign."

Nine-year-old Scott climbs the steps to his classroom two at a time. "My story today is going to be exciting," he says. "It's about cutting down trees." Scott picks up his pencil and whispers, "Boom." He writes the letters b-o-o-m, then erases them. "Boom," he says again, louder, and writes the word in capitals. "How can I make it sound exciting?" he asks.

Across the room, Andrea scowls as she rereads her list of topics. "They are all too big," she signs. "I have to make them more small and detailed." Beside Canada, she adds dashes, ~~her~~ parentheses: Canada -- (the deer we saw). Beside Fishing, she adds -- (The Biggest Fish). Finally the list satisfies her and Andrea is ready to select a topic.

Andrea and Scott don't work with dittos on quotation marks or do exercises on exclamation points. Their teacher doesn't try to squeeze forty minutes out of each day for drill work on language mechanics. Instead she lets her children write.

The children show her what they need to know. Jason wants to tell about his new brother. Sarah wants to capture the wicked monster.

The urge to tell leads Jason and Sarah to struggle with punctuation. "Where do the periods go?" "How can I make the wicked monster groan and yell?" When children write, they ask the questions; they raise the dilemmas. They lead the way, and their teachers follow: watching, waiting, coaching.

"Writing has changed the whole curriculum," Beth Hoban says. "Last year I divided language into little parts - punctuation, spelling, grammar, reading, letter-writing. I made up class lessons for everything, and spent my time trying to convince the children that workbooks were important." The third grade across the hall from Beth Hoban's classroom still learns language that way.

Mrs. West is an 'old-school' teacher. "I start at the beginning, teaching them simple sentences, periods and capitals," she explains. "Everything that is in the book, I do a whole lesson on it." Mrs. West often writes sentences on the chalkboard and asks her children to insert the missing punctuation. She makes dittos on question marks. and gives pretests and post-tests on periods. Her children rarely write.

She is an organized teacher: her grade book is in order, papers are corrected the day they are done, expectations are clear, units are planned several weeks ahead of time. Mrs. West stresses punctuation. She believes in accuracy, in correctness. "If I find a bit of missing punctuation, it is 5 points off. After a couple of low grades, 50's with big red periods all down the page, they learn."

For the purposes of this article, this classroom - typical of so many - will be referred to as the 'mechanics' class. Beth Hoban's classroom will be called the 'writing' classroom.

Both teachers believe in basic skills. One teaches them in isolation; the other teaches them in context. One class studies punctuation through pre-tests, post-tests, exercises and drills. The other class studies punctuation through the writing process - writing, rewriting, editing and publishing. Both teachers say, "I begin at the very beginning." For Mrs. West, the beginning is the declarative sentence and the rules of using periods. For Beth Hoban, the beginning is the child's information, the child's desire to be seen and heard.

For Beth Hoban's third graders, punctuation is part of the urge to tell. Periods and commas give voice to their stories. Her children learn language mechanics without realizing it. Because they invent and use punctuation for their own purposes, they learn it more effectively than if they were doing drills, workbook exercises and language lessons.

This fact has been documented by a study funded by the National Institute of Education. Every day for two years, three full-time researchers are observing twenty children while they write - while they use punctuation in context. The researchers have also interviewed all the children in the two third grade classrooms. "Do you like punctuation? What's it good for?" the children were asked. Then each child from both the writing and the mechanics classrooms

were shown 14 different kinds of punctuation. "What's this for?" the researcher asked as she drew a semi-colon, a carot.

The third grade 'writers' who had not studied punctuation through drills, textbook exercises, or formal instruction could define/explain an average of 8.66 kinds of punctuation. The children who had studied punctuation through classwork, drills, and tests, but have rarely written, were only able to define/explain 3.85 kinds of punctuation.

Why Writers Learn Punctuation: Their Audience

"I like punctuation," the writers say. Chip explains. "It lets you know where the sentence ends, so otherwise one minute you'd be sledding down the hill, and the next minute you're inside the house, without even stopping."

"At the beginning of the year," Chip continues, "I didn't use any punctuation. But then I thought my writing would be more clear if I put it in. It was hard for whoever was reading it to keep going and going without any periods." In Mrs. Hoban's classroom, children often read each other's work in progress.

"Will you read my writing and tell me if it makes sense?" Dan says to his friend. They climb under the coat rack and Kelly begins to read the story in a loud whisper. She reads slowly, faltering over missing punctuation. "Read it better," Dan says. "Come on..." But Kelly can't, not without punctuation. So they borrow the teacher's red pen and put periods, quotations and commas into the draft.

Dan knows his story will be read by classmates, and by other writers in the school. He plans to share it in a first grade room where children also write and learn punctuation through writing. Six-year-old Sunny says, "I like punctuations. They help you with your words." Sunny and her classmates write every day and they write for each other. They spell (and punctuate) their own words. They write the sounds they hear. Joshua says the word 'radio'. 'R' he writes. Again he says the word, listening for its sounds. He puts a 'd' on his page. "There's another sound in the middle," he explains, "but I can't hear what it is." Then he volunteered, "First you hear the beginning and end sounds, then you hear the sounds in the middle."

Later Joshua will use the same careful procedure to listen for periods. At first he'll draw periods only at the end of his story. Later he will hear them at the end of each page. Then, with the help of his teacher, he'll learn to listen for them in the middle of his pages as well. One first grader in the room explains periods this way:

> "A period means the end of a story. You use it at the end of the book that you write.... at the end of the page, too...or in the middle of a page, if you stopped there."

Joshua likes periods. He has a story to tell, and he wants it to be clear. He knows his story will become part of the class library. Periods are part of what he has to tell.

Children in the two writing classrooms - first and third grade - connect punctuation with writing and with reading each other's writing. And they like it.

Fewer than 25% of the children in the 'mechanics' classroom like punctuation. "Punctuation is embarrassing," one nine year old in this class says. "I'd like it if I were good at it, but I'm not," a classmate adds. "You forget what it's for," a third says.

Writers don't forget what punctuation is for. It's for their audience, and it's for their voice.

Why Writers Learn Punctuation: Their Voice

When children write, and then reread what they have written to themselves, their classmates and their teacher, they want punctuation to give voice to their words. They want their print to speak out loud. When young children first tumble talk onto the page, their letters rise and fall, wind and cluster over the page. They darken important syllables, and begin words with capitals. The lilt of spoken language becomes a jumble of contrasts, of capitals and small letters, darkened shapes and lighter ones. When the young child reads what he has written, the contrasts in his print seem to follow - vaguely - the rhythm and expression of his voice.

Yesterday, six year-old Brad wrote the word pull. Then his hand went back, and he carefully darkened each of the letters. "Why'd you do that?" Don Graves asked. Brad looked up at him, and said, "Because I want them to know to really PULL!"

But print is not speech. And patches and strings of letters, big and small, loopy and tight, do not translate into a reader's voice. Scott's friend struggles over Scott's tree-cutting story, reducing the drama to a painful string of broken sounds. Scott sees this. How can he direct the letters b-o-o-m to vibrate into a loud boom! How can he make his reader's voice hang, expectantly before a list of sound effects? Step by step, Scott begins to learn conventional markers which communicate the inflection and pace of his voice.

Peter was the first in his group to bring exclamation marks to school. "Hey, look what my mother showed me," he said. Soon exclamations were spreading like wildfire across the room. At last the children had a substitute for the great big tall letters they'd used as first graders to show important words. Now Peter explains "explanation marks" like this:

> Use them when, like, you yell, "Get Over Here!" Then they'll know you are talking serious.

> I like using them because I like people shouting and I like writing big loud words. I like using big "explanations" because big ones make it louder. Like YUKE!!! That way, it means YUKE (yells) like one big whole sentence of yuke.

Exclamation marks spread through the first grade writing classroom also. There, too, the children like the sound of them. Sunny says they make words sound loud and mad. Six year-old Ellen has a different idea. She refers to them as "a happy mark."

Children develop a hierarchy of exclamation marks. An ordinary sentence receives one, better sentences receive two. "Once I filled

the whole line up with them," a third grader admits.

When children learn something new, they often over-use it. Later they will find a balance. Andrea, a more advanced writer, is able now to say, "Some stories need exclamations, many don't. It depends on the mood you want."

Mrs. Hoban's writers use the sound of language to describe other types of punctuation as well. More than half her class used voice to describe periods. Here are some of their explanations:

> Chip: As you read along in what you've written, you listen to your voice and when it gets lower, that's where you put the period in.
>
> Ginny: I say what I'm going to write, and after each thing I say to myself, I put a period.
>
> Terry: I listen and hear where I stop, and put the period there.

First grade writers, like third graders, often describe periods by referring to the sound of their voice.

> Ellen: Use periods at the end of a sentence. You just say a couple of words, but they have to make sense together.
>
> Sandy: When you want someone to stop and you are going to a new idea. Not a whole different idea, just changing part of it.
>
> (Other first graders think periods should be used to dot i's and j's.)

Forty-seven percent of the explanations <u>writers</u> gave referred to the way punctuation effects the pace and inflection of language. Only nine percent of the <u>non-writers</u> definitions referred to this.

Why Writers Learn Punctuation: They Go Beyond Rules

The non-writers described punctuation by trying to remember the rules they'd been taught. Mrs. West's class knew periods come at the end of a sentence. But when the researcher asked them where to end a sentence, they didn't know. "You can tell where to end it by the period," was all they could say. One boy had mastered the tricks of the trade. He suggested you look and see if a capital letter comes next, and if so, insert the period. The boy will do well on the third grade achievement tests. Probably many of his classmates will, as well. But drills on missing punctuation have little carry over into writing.

Jack learned commas are for lists . people - Joe, Frank, Peter. "Anywhere else?" the researcher asked. "Sometimes when you paint, Jack said. "Different colors - purple, green, blue." Then he added, "But nowhere else."

While Jack waits for a painting story, Amy, a writer, uses commas with intuitive ease.

> If you have a long sentence and you want to keep it all there, you put a comma in to take a breath. If you were to make a new sentence, you'd change it up. One example is my last piece of writing. I said, "We got a little lower and over the beach, I saw tiny colored dots."
>
> Before and after the commas, they are both parts of the same sentence. Like the first half of the sentence is one paragraph, and the other half is the second paragraph...like two edges of the same idea.

Many of the mechanics students defined commas by referring to one specific use only. "Put it in between fruit." "Commas separate

states."

The writers didn't refer to rules but to their writing. Ginny, a dark-eyed quiet girl, surprised people with this answer:

> A comma is when you don't want to put the word and, so you put a comma instead. If you do use ands, they'll go all over your paper. Commas take care of some of the ands.

Karl, a slow student who has a hard time putting print onto the page, says,

> Use commas for someone to take a little breathe of air, in some of your long sentences.

Because Karl and Ginny have learned punctuation in context, they have learned more than rules. They are developing an intuitive sense for the nuances of punctuation.

Why Writers Learn Punctuation: They Need It

Children from both rooms had difficulty with commas. They picked at their sneakers, squirmed, and finally admitted, "I should know them but I don't." Teachers think commas are a simple, basic kind of punctuation. Children prefer exclamation marks, dashes, apostrophes - codes with less elusive uses.

These lists show the number of children from each of the two third grades who correctly described each type of punctuation:

Writing Class (total=18)		Mechanics Class (total=16)	
period	18	period	13
exclamation mark	16	question mark	10
question mark	16	exclamation mark	8
apostrophe	14	parentheses	7
paragraph sign	13	apostrophe	4
dash	12	dash	4
carot	11	comma	3
quotation marks	11	quotation marks	2
comma	10		
colon	8		
parentheses	7		
asterisk	7		
semi-colon	1		

The order of the lists is similar. But the writers know many more types of punctuation. They know asterisks, colons, carots, parentheses - punctuation that are often not "taught" until the middle school years.

They know these not only because they write, but because they write well. In early September, Mrs. Hoban's children mostly wrote in simple sentences, without including dialogue, supportive information, sound effects or exclamations. They needed only an average of 2.22 different kinds of punctuation to correctly punctuate a piece of writing, and they used an average of 1.25 different kinds in a piece.

Since then, the children have learned to be detailed and precise in their writing. "I try to think of exactly what happened, to make a picture of it in my mind," eight year old Andrea says. "Then I can try for the words to put exactly what happened onto the paper. Andrea writes a line and then pulls back to see what she has said.

> It was my birthday. Just then I was told to close my eyes. What's going on? I wondered. Finally I could open them and in front of me was a big box.

She reread the line. "It'd sound more alive if I put it in her words," Andrea said. She drew a line through her lead, and wrote instead:

> Happy birthday! My sister handed me a big box. Open it, she cried.

She again reread it, this time out loud. She adds quotation marks, and continues to write.

> "Open it," she said. I did. And in the box was a ball of fur with eyes!

Andrea's eyes shift back over her words. With a carot she inserts 'big' before the words 'ball of fur.' "I have to work a long time on a little section," Andrea says, "or I can't get it right."

When children struggle to be clear and precise in their language, their writing leads them to a variety of punctuation. As Andrea has found, revision, especially, demands a wide variety of punctuation. Carots, parentheses, asterisks and arrows help children sculpt their words. Through punctuation codes, they move language about on the page.

"Sometimes I have to make up my own signs." Andrea explains. "Yesterday when I reread my piece, I wanted to mark the words that maybe don't belong. I couldn't circle them, because for me circles are for spelling mistakes. So I put a box and a star around each word I needed to maybe cross out."

This is how Andrea's draft looked.

> I love Sat^e rday nights when my father lays on the couch with me. I lay in a pocket my father makes with his legs. *We watch t.v. *Then we get hungry. My father gets up *and goes into the kichen. . .

When children write in active voice and include 'special effects' in their writing, they also use more punctuation. "I keep putting new kinds of punctuation into my writing," nine year-old Aron says, "because I need them. Like sound effects - it takes weird punctuation to put thud-thud or splat! onto my paper." Steven tried several kinds of punctuation to accompany the ring of his alarm clock. First he wrote Rrrrr! but he erased it. "That sounds too sudden, like it ends too quickly," he explained. "Really it went on and on until finally I got out of bed." Steven's final draft reads, "Rrrr.. ....the alarm blasted into the room." Since then, Steven has used three dots several times. "To me it means one, two, three minutes went by."

In early September, Mrs. Hoban's children didn't put the ring of the alarm clock or the rustle of leaves into their writing. And they didn't reread, rewrite, refocus and revise in order to be clear. It's no wonder they only needed 2.22 kinds of punctuation in order to correctly punctuate a page of their writing.

But by February, Mrs. Hoban's children need an average of 5.62 different kinds of punctuation in their writing.

Average Number of Kinds of Punctuation Used and Needed, in Piece of Writing from 3 Different Time Periods

Time	Average Kinds Needed	Average Kinds Used
9/78	2.22	1.25
11-12/78	4.44	3.25
1-2/79	5.62	5.00

When Punctuation is Learned: Not Taught

Writers find punctuation everywhere. They notice it on billboards, in magazines. Even if they have never used colons or parentheses, they are usually familiar with them. Six year-old Chris nods at the sight of the colon. "My Dad has those on his calculator," he says. "But I don't know what they mean." First grader, Joshua, has seen the parentheses. "They are in my math book on the next page, coming up. I think it is regrouping." Third grade writers notice the colons in dictionaries, and the ...'s in their reading books. When asked to explain punctuation they don't know, they usually answered, "I've seen them, but I don't really know what they mean."

Across the hall, the mechanics students were baffled and amazed at many of the punctuation marks. "Are those English?" they asked. "I've never seen half of those." They hadn't seen them, because they had no use for them.

Six year-old Kevin brings his book to the teacher and they read it together. One page looks like this:

it is fun waen I gat to ried in bad's solbimal.

Kevin read it out loud to his teacher: It is fun when I get to ride in Dad's snowmobile.

Mrs. Gerry is surprised. Kevin still confuses his vowel sounds and leaves out consonants. Yet he used the possessive apostrophe. "Where did you learn this?" she asks. Kevin shrugs. "I saw it in a book and thought I could put it here." When children need punctuation in order for their messages to be seen and heard, they become vacuum cleaners, sucking up odd bits from books, the classroom, other children's papers.

Third grader, Dan, hovers near his teacher when she had conferences with other children. "I know he's eavesdropping," she said. "But that's o.k. If I help Terry with quotes in her final draft, the next day Dan will be using them too." She's sure Dan would balk at quotations if they were presented in a class lecture. But the 1:1 interaction is so attractive, it makes punctuation an altogether different matter.

First grader, Emily, never used periods until one day she decided to play Teacher. This time the first grader wrote in careful, tight letters instead of her usually loopy ones. And she used periods.

Oftentimes young writers use punctuation for unorthodox purposes. When Darron first wrote, he strung his letters together with no spaces between his words. His writing resembled his speech - it was one continuous flow of sounds. No one could read it. Then one day Darron made a dash between his first and last name. "So people can tell which is which."

No one corrected Darron's use of the dash. Adult 'mistakes' are often a child's 'step.' Darron's teacher encourages children to experiment with punctuation, to solve their own problems. Later, if Darron doesn't stop separating words with dashes, his teacher will suggest he leave spaces instead of dashes.

Like Darron, Bill invents punctuation. When he first wrote his name on two lines, his last name went from left to right, and it was on top of his first name. He drew an arrow from the end of the first name to the beginning of the last name - "So they'll know where to put their eyes when they read whose picture it is," he explained.

Anna read her book out loud several times, following the letters with her finger as she read. Each time she looked at the letters for a long time before she could separate them into words. The next time she wrote, Anna separated some of her words with 'polka-dots',

We° HerD° Mrerse (We heard music.)

Third graders, like first graders, often misuse punctuation when they first use it. "I never mark it wrong, or take points off for it," their teacher says. "I want them to try new things, to not be afraid of making mistakes."

Mrs. Hoban doesn't regard a paper which is full of mechanical mistakes as wrong, only unfinished. "Each child is different," she says. "Some write their first drafts without any punctuation. They need to just concentrate on their words; later they put in the punctuation. Others put punctuation into every line as they write it."

She respects the different methods. Some first drafts are hard to read, so she asks the writer to read it out loud. "I always want to respond first to the content of the paper. I listen to what the child is saying." She lets Peter teach her about snowshoeing and she admired Ginny's new fur coat. Only in a later draft does she look at punctuation.

"Mrs. Hoban, will you help me correct this ski story," Les says. "I think I'm ready for a final draft." Les has written and rewritten his piece several times, and now he wants it perfect. He knows his final draft will be mounted and displayed. He wants to be proud of it.

They read the story together.

My Red Sled Cracked Me Up

> Zoom, I went down the hill with my boots locked into my red sled Until I went over the snow jump then all of the sudden my sled sliped away and I hit the ground bump my friends didn't know I was hurt...

"Les," Mrs. Hoban said, "You've got a good piece of writing here. But it's hard for me to read it without punctuation. Go back and put in what you think it needs. Then we'll look at it together.

Writer becomes editor. With a critical, careful eye, Les examines each word, each space. He reads his words out loud, listening to his voice. Line by line, word by word, he scrutinizes his page.

"Those marks after your title and after the word 'Zoom' are

interesting," Mrs. Hoban says later as she points to his hybrid exclamation/quotation marks. "What do they mean to you?"

Les blushed. "I saw them in a book once. I decided to put them in after someone said something exciting," he said. "Are they right?"

That day, Les learned to distinguish exclamation marks from quotations. And he learned experiments are o.k. Later he will try out other kinds of markers - the parentheses he sees in dictionaries, the colons a friend is using. Through experiments, he'll learn. Les isn't afraid of punctuation. And he needs it.